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ABSTRACT

A study of the fictional treatment of the same theme--man's depravity--in "Lord of the Flies" and "Heart of Darkness" provides an approach to literary study which sharpens students' analytical skills through a comparison of the books and an exploration of the uniqueness of each. Although there are differences evident between the books (e.g., Golding provokes an emotional response while Conrad elicits an intellectual response; Golding's manner is direct while Conrad's style is indirect), the similarities in plot, in symbolic representation of evil, and in presentation of the theme offer stimulating areas for discussion. (Suggested topics for discussion and papers are given.) (JMC)

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The Darkness of Man's Heart

Exploring the depths of depravity in Golding and Conrad.

by Elaine Camerota

". . . there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber."[1]

Where have you seen these lines before? It looks like a description of the pig's head from *Lord of the Flies,* but it is not. The passage from *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow's impression of one of a collection of heads which Mr. Kurtz, a trader in African ivory, used to decorate the fence outside his cabin. Like the children in Golding's novel, Kurtz "lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" and the wilderness which he found "irresistibly fascinating" had "found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance. . . ." *Ibid.* This is only one of many similarities between *Lord of the Flies* and *Heart of Darkness,* but it is striking enough to suggest that English instructors take a closer look at these two novels to see whether anything can be made of their likeness.

Golding and Conrad have much in common. As careful stylists who favor long, descriptive sentences, they stand apart from the twentieth century penchant for laconic writing. Despite its sometimes turgid style, *Lord of the Flies* is usually read enthusiastically and understood readily by high school students from bright freshmen to slow seniors. *Heart of Darkness* is harder and does not teach itself. It is difficult reading even for a sophisticated, literate adult.

Why? Conrad and Golding are symbolists, moralists, and vivid imagists. In the novels they deal with essentially the same theme. Even the structural framework of the stories is somewhat parallel. The answer, I think, is that Golding appeals primarily to an emotional while Conrad elicits an intellectual response in the reader. Even to the sophisticated senior, weaned on James Bond brutality, the murder of Simon and the closing in on Ralph at the end of *Lord of the Flies,* produces a visceral reaction. Conversely, the confrontation between Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is vividly but more austerely presented, causing the reader to be mentally stimulated but relatively untouched emotionally.

NARRATIVE STYLE COMPARED

Another difference lies in their narrative methods. Both authors are more interested in theme than plot, but their narrative approaches differ greatly. *Lord of the Flies* is presented in straight chronological order with little ambiguity about the events of the story. The significance of those events is another matter. Golding's manner is direct; as omniscient author, he makes a point at the end of each chapter which is hard to miss. Conrad's style in the three long chapters of *Heart of Darkness* is indirect. He makes his points implicitly, thus immediate comprehension is difficult. Reading *Heart of Darkness* is like struggling to open a box only to find another box locked inside. Marlow relates Kurtz's story; another narrator tells us Marlow's story. The first narrator says Marlow tells "inconclusive tales" and explains

"to him the meaning of an episode was not

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1. Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE SECRET SHARER, New York: New American Library, Signet Classic, 18th printing (50¢), 1950, p. 133. All subsequent novel references are from this text.

2. William Golding, LORD OF THE FLIES, New York: G. T. Putnam's Sons, Capricorn Books ($1.25), 1959, pp. 186-7. All subsequent novel references are from this text.

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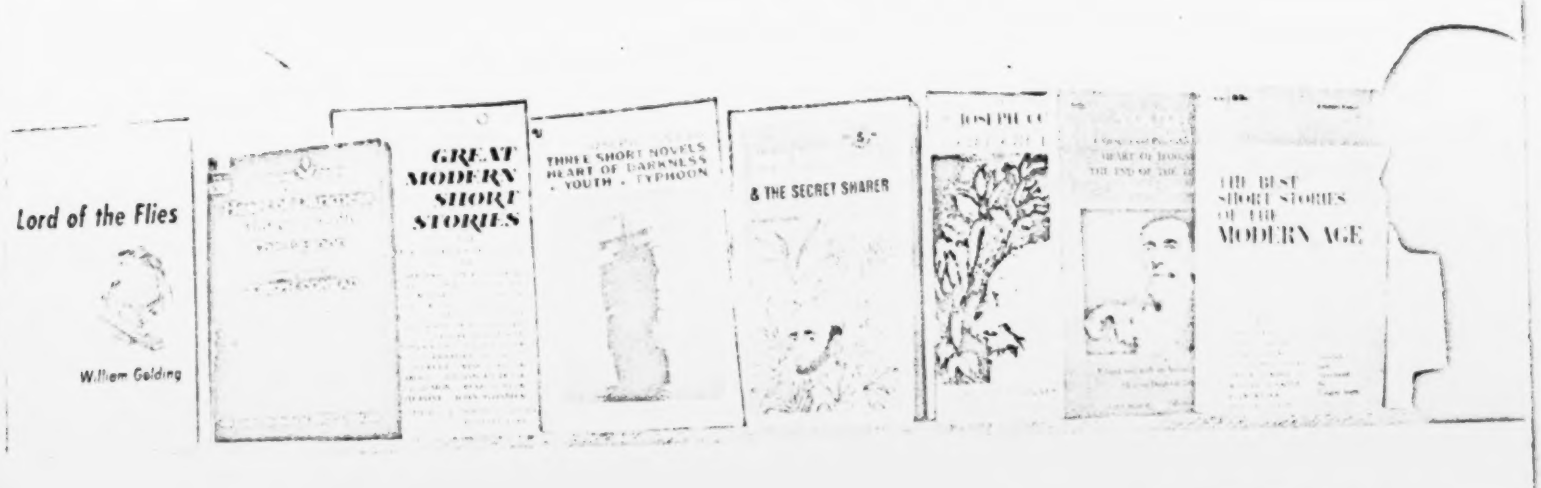

inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty haloes that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (p. 68)

This is an accurate description of Conrad's own style.

With such marked contrasts, how are these novels alike? First, there are plot similarities. In both books English citizens, traditionally the bulwarks of civilization, are thrust into a jungle where, severed from the rules and tabus of western society, their deepest values are tested. Marlow, the complete Victorian gentleman of *Heart of Darkness*, with perfect faith in the protective covering of civilization, is pitted against the primeval and learns that his own heart has a dark side. In *Lord of the Flies* both Ralph and Piggy parallel Marlow. Piggy, who also puts his trust in civilization, is like Marlow before he sees in Kurtz "the fascination of the abomination." (p. 69) Despite his common sense, he has no insight into human nature; he could never perceive Simon's revelation about the beast, and he refuses to admit the truth about Simon's murder. Therefore he does not survive. Ralph, the Everyman of the British public school set, like Marlow, suffers the ordeal of confrontation with his hidden self. He exulted in killing the pig; he actively participated in the ritualistic murder of Simon, and at the end of the story, he "wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart. . . ."[2] But he and Marlow will survive. They illustrate William Blake's belief that only after losing innocence can one truly acquire it.

Both books are symbolic. Golding makes it clear that the island on which the boys act out their savage rites is not so different from their native Britain. They are rescued from their primitive little war by officers who will take them aboard a "trim cruiser" (p. 187) returning them to a more advanced but no less savage war. Marlow begins his tale by quietly reminding his audience that Britain was not always the epitome of civilization. " 'And this also [England],' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.' " (p. 67) He was referring ostensibly to antiquity when the Romans invaded this primitive island. At the story's close we look toward land, London, with Marlow and see that "the offing was barred by a black bank of clouds and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." (pp. 157-8) We realize that Marlow means England is "one of the dark places of the earth." Neither Conrad nor Golding was attacking England; they were simply using it as a metaphor for the world and for mankind.

SIMILARITIES IN THEME

Although Golding lists Euripides and the author of the Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Battle of Maldon," as literary influences, he and Conrad have written similar novels. Their theme, man's inescapable connection with evil, is the same, but what of that? Isn't that what everybody has been writing about since *Genesis*? Their similarity lies instead in their attitude towards and their presentation of this theme.

In both stories civilization, with its emphasis upon order, is *apparently* good. If things appear orderly, perhaps they are. At the beginning of *Lord of the Flies* the appearance of Jack's choir boys and their rigid attention to discipline, are impressive tributes to their tightly controlled upbringing. Golding symbolizes their fall from respectable society by having their clothes turn to shreds and by allowing them to grow long hair and to paint their faces. Thus they replace the mask of order with the mask of anarchy. Similarly Marlow admires the Company's chief ac-

countant. ". . . I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair . . . in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone." (p. 83) Marlow believes that "what saves us from the darkness is efficiency–the devotion to efficiency." (p. 69) The consequence of lack of efficiency is shown when the boys on the island allow the fire to go out. Marlow also has faith in the power of work to keep man's internal order. "I don't like work–no man does–but I like what is in the work,–the chance to find yourself. Your own reality–for yourself, not for others–what no other man can ever know." (p. 97) Marlow would certainly have been unhappy about the abandonment of the shelter building program in *Lord of the Flies*. This perfectly illustrates his point.

CIVILIZATION'S SAVAGES

Both Conrad and Golding make us see that external rules are meretricious; only internal rules have value. In *Lord of the Flies* it is Jack rather than Ralph or Piggy who says, "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English, and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things." (p. 38) And when Jack becomes tribe leader, the rules must be obeyed, only now the spear has replaced the conch as the symbol of authority. In *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz, the European idealist, is a hollow man relying like Jack on ritual rather than restraint to maintain order. Marlow, who lives Kurtz's tragedy, realizes that "[Man] must meet that truth [heart of darkness] with his own stuff–with his inborn strength. Principles won't do." (p. 106) Paradoxically, the restraint lacking in Kurtz and in the boys on the island, products of civilization, is found in the starving cannibals of Conrad's story who refuse to eat the white men they work for.

Neither Kurtz nor the boys can resist the anarchy of the jungle, the authors' metaphor for the subconscious forces of man's mind, Kurtz because he is "hollow at the core" (p. 133), the boys perhaps because they lack experience. In both novels, their weakness is revealed when they are placed in an isolated environment without the supervision of others who share their ideas about social order. None of us believes we would react like Kurtz and the boys. Marlow has a hard time convincing his complacent listeners of that possibility:

> ". . . how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammeled feet may take him by way of solitude–utter solitude without a policeman . . . where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness." (p. 122)

In isolation the irrational becomes inseparable from the rational. In *Lord of the Flies* the boys sense a "beastie." When the assembly votes that it believes in ghosts, Ralph realizes that "the world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away." (p. 84) Even Jack, the warrior, fears the jungle:

> "If you're hunting sometimes you catch yourself feeling as if. . . . There's nothing in it, of course. Just a feeling. But you can feel as if you're not hunting, but–being hunted, as if something's behind you all the time in the jungle." (p. 47)

Marlow, too, feels hunted: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us. . . ." (p 105) He goes on to explain the effect of this irrational, invisible presence:

> "[Man] has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination . . . imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." (p. 69)

Predictably, Kurtz and the English school boys finally do surrender to the "fascination of the abomination."

FIXATION OF DEPRAVITY

What is this abomination which fascinated both Golding and Conrad? Each author shows dramatically man's conflict with what theology calls evil and what psychology calls the id or the unconscious. The title of each book reveals the metaphor the author has chosen to symbolize this force. On one level of meaning, the characters struggle with an external enemy such as the jungle or the pig's head. On a more complex level, the characters are struggling with themselves. Conrad reminds us often that Marlow's journey has more than literal significance. Before leaving for the Congo, Marlow visits a European doctor who curiously asks to measure his head, solemnly warning the startled Marlow that "the changes take place inside," (p. 75) those who go to Africa. As he travels toward his destination, Marlow hears constant references to Kurtz whom he anxiously and inexplicably wants

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to meet. Although the story is ostensibly about Kurtz, we finally realize that he merely symbolizes the possibilities for depravity that exist in Marlow's and in every man's heart. We can, therefore, translate the chief accountant's statemeant to Marlow, "In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz," (p. 84) to mean 'In the heart of darkness you will meet your own evil nature.' This is exactly what happens; Marlow is profoundly affected by his experience with Kurtz which somehow makes him know himself better. He believes:

> "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminaitng point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts." (p. 70)

In *Lord of the Flies* it is Simon who acquires the same knowledge as Marlow. He has begun to suspect the truth when at one of the meetings he timidly suggests that the "beastie" may be themselves, but he is shouted down by the others. Full knowledge comes during his mystic interview with the pig's head:

> "At last Simon gave up and looked back; saw the white teeth and dim eyes, the blood—and his gaze was held by that ancient inescapable recognition. (p. 128)
>
> 'Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!' said the head . . . 'You knew didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are? . . . This is ridiculous. You know perfectly well you'll only meet me down there—so don't try to escape!' " (p. 133)

THE ESSENCE OF EVIL

What is the nature of the evil universes created by Conrad and Golding? The Lord of the Flies is a god or devil of weakness, corruption, and depravity. The pig's head rules insects which feed on decaying matter. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow has a choice of evils or a "choice of nightmares" (p. 138) as he puts it. He rejects the manager, "a flabby pretending weak-eyed devil" (p. 81) and the brickmaker, "a papier-mache Mephistopheles" (p. 93) in favor of Kurtz, "the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire." (p. 81) He was one of the "strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men." (p. 81) In other words Marlow rejects the evil which is a vacuum and chooses the one which is a positive force, which requires self-commitment.

Perhaps because Marlow makes a choice freely and remains loyal to it, he is a better person at the story's end. His first reaction upon returning to Europe is, like Gulliver, to shun other human beings because they have not discovered his truth. Finally, however, he becomes a cross between the Ancient Mariner, who must repeat his tale in hopes of instructing others, and a Buddha, self-contained and serene in his knowledge of himself and his world. Ralph and the other boys on the island appear to have a bleaker future. Like Marlow they have fallen from innocence and must return to a world of false values, but Golding offers us no hope for their eventual redemption.

TEACHING TWO TOGETHER

Aside from the chronological approach, the two most common methods of teaching fiction in high school are analyzing a work in isolation and studying many works together in one thematic unit. Why not combine these approaches and teach two similar books together? There are advantages to this method. First, with complex books, each helps to explicate the other. Com-

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parison and contrast sharpens the students' analytical and critical powers. Second, when analyzing in depth two works with parallel themes, students can concentrate equally on thematic similarities and differences AND on the uniqueness of each book. Finally, pairing books is a good change of pace from the more frequently used approaches for both teachers and pupils.

Obviously there are as many exciting techniques as there are imaginative, thoughtful instructors. Here are a suggested framework and some topics for discussion, debates, and papers. I would recommend teaching *Lord of the Flies* in whichever manner the teacher chooses, following it immediately with *Heart of Darkness* doing the same. Do not refer explicitly to one novel while discussing the other, but save all comparison until the students are thoroughly familiar with both.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

I. Compare and contrast the use of the jungle by Conrad and Golding.

II. Compare and contrast the attitudes of the authors toward European civilization.

III. Compare and contrast the authors' attitudes on the nature of man. Relate their ideas to such religious and ethical philosophies as Christianity, Existentialism, and Buddhism.

IV. Discuss and evaluate the authors' use of symbolism. Do they use it for the same purposes? With equal success?

V. Analyze the conclusions Conrad and Golding try to leave with the reader. Is one more optimistic than the other? If so, could the time in which each book was written account for the difference?

VI. Where does each author place ultimate responsibility for good and evil, with the individual or with society? How alike are Golding and Conrad in this matter?

VII. Discuss the irony in both novels. Is it successful?

VIII. How plausible are the events in these stories? Discuss the effects of isolation from a normal environment and/or subjection to unusual pressure. Examples: a) the tragedy of the Donner Pass b) the men who mutineed on the *Bounty* c) psychological case studies of children reared in isolation.

IX. Contrast the point of view of each novel. Is there an advantage in Conrad's elaborate story within a story technique?

X. We know what has happened to Marlow years after his encounter with Kurtz, but Golding is not so informative about Ralph and his fellow savages. Write a creative speculation about a significant event in the near or distant future of one of the characters from *Lord of the Flies*.

XI. Finally, after exhausting the possibilities for comparison and contrast between *Lord of the Flies* and *Heart of Darkness*, some students may wish to use the same method with other works. *Lord of the Flies* and *A Separate Peace* make good companion pieces. Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene have enough in common to make interesting comparisons between *Heart of Darkness* and either *The Heart of the Matter* or *A Burnt-Out Case*. And certainly the whole class should study Eliot's *The Hollow Men* with its epigraph, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" and its relation to *Heart of Darkness*.

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